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Matt Middleton is the founder and CEO of Future Proof.
Courtesy photo

**Matt Middleton on future proofing Future Proof**
By Rob Burgess
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Now in its fourth year, Future Proof is larger than ever.

This year's event features five stages, six football fields worth of boardwalk, 5,000-plus attendees and around 100 sessions featuring over 200 speakers, including this reporter.

"The people who attend our event, whether they're in media, the profession or are product providers, they're all coming here with the view that they want to lead and be in the top 5% in the next decade," said Matt Middleton, founder and CEO.

In addition to its annual flagship event each September in Huntington Beach, California, the brand has expanded. In October, the Future Proof Growth Retreat is planned for Nassau, Bahamas. Future Proof Citywide is set for March 2026 in Miami Beach, Florida. And the annual Future Proof Leaders Retreat was most recently held in May in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"The growth is not just trying to target the same group over and over and over again like most people do," said Middleton.

In addition to Future Proof, Middleton is also involved in other events businesses, including as a board member and shareholder since 2023 of Create & Cultivate, which caters to women in business, and co-founder of RetailClub, which serves the retail industry.

Before forming Future Proof in 2021, Middleton already had extensive experience in business-to-business media in the wealth management industry, having served in multiple roles at Informa from 2011 to 2020. In August, Middleton and Anil D. Aggarwal acquired a majority stake in ETF.com from ETFS Capital, which will retain a minority interest. And while Middleton assumed the CEO role upon acquisition, last week, Dave Nadig was named president and director of research. Middleton called ETF.com and Future Proof "sister companies."

"I'm going to turn ETF.com into an event-first media business," he said. "It doesn't mean we're walking away from the website. It doesn't mean that we're basically forgetting the editorial component. But our revenue is not going to be solely focused on building value in those places. It's going to be focused on building community and value across the events piece, and that will be for both self-directed investors as well as the advisor community."

As this year's edition of Future Proof kicks off on Sunday, Middleton took the time to speak with Financial Planning about what's new at this year's event, why speakers pushing the envelope on stage is a strategic choice, how they choose the musical acts and more.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.*

**Financial Planning**: What are you most excited about for this year's Future

Proof?

**Matt Middleton**: What's interesting is that, on average, every year, we have over 50% new attendees. You may get the same firm. Maybe they send different people. We go from 1,700 to 2,400 to 4,400 to now 5,000.

For us, the goal is not to rest. People love Future Proof. Now, it's gotten really big. We could sit here and pack it in and say, "Let go, just rinse and repeat." But for the 2,500-plus people that are experiencing the event for the first time this year, we need to be thinking about, "What is that first impression? What is their first interaction with the brand?" You sharpen it each and every time. You double down on what's working, and you throw away what isn't. You listen to feedback.

Because it's a known thing now, people are talking about it almost year-round. There are higher stakes than ever before. But more importantly, this is the first year we put a cap on it. Every year, from inception, it was launched at scale and doubled and doubled. Now we're at a point where, in the city of Huntington Beach, there are physical constraints. We can't get any more space on the beach. We're limited in the number of hotel rooms. We have four hotels in Huntington Beach. We have 12 hotels sold out in Newport Beach. We have people staying in Irvine. There's no Airbnb available anywhere within 20 minutes of the destination. It's the first time where we are truly at capacity. We're trying to understand how the community is going to engage. Because you have these big, shocking moments, but also you have to drop in, what I like to call those magical moments, the unexpected feature, where maybe only 20 people get to see and experience it.

More generally, I'm excited about the growth of our breakthrough experiences. That's one of our network and technology components that the industry has adopted. With that, we're going to see over 60 different group activities taking place at booths and in the space throughout the days, running alongside our content and our meetings program. It helps to build that thesis of ours, which is, this is a gathering that's built by the community, not just by one brand or product provider. We create the experience, and everyone helps to usher it in and steward it. We'll see a lot more activities going that way.

**FP**: I attended and hosted a panel at Future Proof two years ago, and one of the things that struck me about the content was how challenging it often was. I heard more things that I hadn't heard before, and frankly some things that I didn't necessarily agree with, than at many other conferences. The event seems to have this attitude of not being afraid to push the envelope a bit. And it was interesting, because in the prep call for the panel I'm hosting this year, one of my panelists wanted to know what the parameters were. And the person from Future Proof told her that making the audience somewhat uncomfortable was fine. "Squirming is OK because that's where the growth happens, and that's actually where the magic happens, where attendees feel like they really got something out of your session," they said. Is that outlook intentional on your part?

**MM**: We have a no-pay-to-play model, which gives us a lot of freedom.

This industry grows based on different opinions and values coming together to shape the future. Our events should replicate that. You have to give folks like you the freedom to be tasteful, but actually get the audience to think and not just pay attention to their email on their phone.

We want to make our content feel comfortable and casual. We want people to not just pat each other on the back, but disagree or give counterpoints. The goal here is to create conversation off stage among the community itself. Because that's the value of these events. If people think that live events today, where people are traveling across the country, or the world, in the case of Future Proof, to go and breathe the same oxygen as someone on a stage where they can listen passively, that's bullshit. People are coming because they want to connect with their peers and with other people who have strong views on the future. Content is a function of creating dialogue off stage. It's nothing else but that. That's why we don't offer CE credits. We'd have to label every session, "CE credit approved," and make it a perfect 50 minutes. I can't pay attention for 50 minutes. I have ADHD. I don't care. I say this all the time: If Jesus Christ himself were telling me, "Hey, just pay attention to me and you go to heaven." I would struggle to sit there for 50 minutes. Why do we all do this dance in the industry to say that the value of people attending events is for CE credits? It's just bullshit, and we're proving it right.

The value is in getting insights that otherwise can't be read about, and then being able to challenge them and go deeper in real time. That is what you see at Future Proof. And we give the freedom to the people on stage, and we actually push them to do that, versus do the same vanilla stuff they do at most events. And then what we ask of them is that they make themselves available after the session and during the event. That's another secret. We have very big speakers, but they actually come to attend the event. They're not just parachuting in, getting mic'd up, joining the stage, saying their piece and then walking off and jumping on a flight. They're committing their four days to engage with the community. That's what makes it fun, because you get these people that you see on TV, or that you value their opinions, and you almost look up to them as like celebrities in the industry, and they're approachable. If anything, they're asking you the questions.

**FP**: This year, Bush and Blues Traveler are co-headlining the concert. How do you go about choosing the musical acts for Future Proof? Because, as a millennial myself, I have to say, you've been systematically running through the CD binder I kept in the car I drove every day to and from high school.

**MM**: It gets harder and harder each year. I'll be honest with you, it's whatever we're feeling. We look at the attendee list. You'll see it when you register. We ask the question, "What's your favorite music genre?" Most people are like, "Oh, why do you ask? That's kind of weird." We also ask about favorite food because that's

how we build the food truck. And music is based on what people want to hear.

For the last two years, rock has been the top musical genre. We have to think about our demo, which is everything from 25 to 65. It's hard because everyone has different music tastes. Where do you lean in? I'm a millennial, too. I'm 37. So, I want to hit a little bit of nostalgia, the music that I still play and for my kids and they're like, "Turn this off." As well as something that the older folks are like, "Oh my God. I still listen to this. This is my music." I think every year it gets harder, because you have to have a little bit of pop culture mix. A few songs that still get played on the radio, that are basically ageless or timeless.

And then the truth is, you have to find bands that actually perform well, too. Because there's something about the nostalgia of the music and the songs. And take you back to that moment where you're like, "Oh, I burned that CD and listened to it on that long vacation." But that person needs to perform well live. There's a lot of work that goes into that.

**FP**: What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

**MM**: Bet on yourself. Especially in a world where everyone's trying to share their investment philosophy. The single most important thing that anyone's ever shared is, "If you have such strong opinions and you're willing to go that hard, put all your wealth, all your time, all your money into yourself."